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Matilde Mellibovsky. *Circle of Love Over Death: Testimonies of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.* Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1997. xvi + 249 pp. $14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-880684-38-2.

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ARGENTINE MOTHERS CONTINUE

First published in Spanish in Buenos Aires in 1990, this book was written and edited by one of the founders of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The translator, Maria Proser, was born in Argentina and now resides in Storrs, Connecticut with her husband Matthew Proser, who retired from the University of Connecticut where he taught modern drama, creative writing, and Shakespeare. Although it was written earlier, other books on the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo preceded it in English: Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1989 and 1994), and Jo Fisher, *Mothers of the Disappeared* (1995). John Simpson and Jana Bennett published *The Disappeared and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: the Story of the 11,000 Argentinians Who Vanished* (1985).

Circle of Love is a compilation of the Mothers' memories of their children. Over twenty-one contributed personal accounts of their children, sometimes accompanied by poems, thoughts, or quotations from their children. The years covered are those of "the Dirty War," 1975-1983, which began in the last year of Isabel Peron's administration. The military replaced her in a coup and ruled from 1976-83. Democratic government was restored with the election of the Radical Party's Raul Alfonsin, followed by two terms of the Peronist Party's Carlos Menem, 1983 to present.[1]

Mellibovsky, whose 29-year old daughter Graciela was kidnapped and "disappeared" in 1976, conceived of writing this book when an American author approached her in Buenos Aires for materials on the missing children. Mellibovsky realized that there was a need to write a book so that the lives of the victims would be remembered. She proposed to mothers she met that they record on tape or write the stories of their children. The experience, while painful, proved to be cathartic. The mothers felt they were paying tribute to a generation of children that had been "disappeared," thereby retaining their memory and the links to the past and future.

What emerges is a collection of remembrances that are organized chronologically to reflect the development of the mothers from individual anguish and shock to concerted action to protest the disappearance of their children. The mothers faced hostile police and military who refused to admit they had possession of their children; their writs of habeas corpus were ignored. Each mother recounts how she became involved with the "Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo," who took their name from the central plaza of downtown Buenos Aires, where they walked in a circle every Thursday afternoon–a "circle of love." Later, they began to carry pictures and photos of their missing children and grandchildren and to wear white kerchiefs so that they could recognize each other (pp. 17-18). (Bouvard has offered different reason for their origin–they were symbols of diapers and maternal purity.)[2] Slowly the mothers reached out to foreign governments for help, even traveling abroad to tell their stories and request aid for their movement. A group of women in Holland gave them money for a meeting house in 1982, which enabled mothers, especially those who lived far away in the provinces, to have a place to visit.

Most poignantly, the mothers write of children who cared for others. Their kids were young and idealistic, many were involved with helping children in the "villas miserias" (slums). Others were medical students, social workers, and psychology majors who worked with workers of the poor. One young person wrote articles opposing the military dictatorship, another reported on human rights abuses, and a third was a young lawyer who helped political prisoners. Some probably were taken because of activities of their friends. What they seemed to have in common is that they cared for those less fortunate than they, they loved to study and usually excelled at school. Some were still in high school or even younger when they were picked up by the security forces. Children were born in prison or kidnaped along with their parents.

The mothers acknowledge the many others who "disappeared," such as lawyers who sought to defend political prisoners. Mellibovsky tries to give a fuller picture of the thousands who were kidnaped and murdered–the Mothers claim 30,000–by including the testimony of a wife whose husband disappeared and that of a grandmother who lost a granddaughter and who went on to help organize the "Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo."

Where did these children learn to care for others?-From their homes, and from schools that, in many cases, were Roman Catholic. This produced two ironies, if not sources of anguish, for the mothers. Their children reflected values they learned from their fathers and mothers, who are predominantly middle class working in the service sector or in factories. Are these mothers and fathers guilty of what consequences befell them? No, they answer in separate stories, because their children were reared as caring human beings, and represented what Argentina and the world needed. That is why they admired and loved their children. It was the misery of military dictatorship that could consider helping the poor to be a crime. That some Roman Catholic schools and groups had been so influential in encouraging activism and volunteering with the needy led to the final irony: the Roman Catholic hierarchy turned its backs on the prisoners and the mothers' pleas for help. Disgusted and infuriated, many of the mothers abandoned the church.

Were all of these disappeared children so innocent rather than armed subversives as the military depicted them? All were non-violent in these examples; none took up arms in these approximately twenty-five biographies. Were all of the homes as politically naive as the mothers make themselves out to be? Again, hard to say since the representativeness of Mellibovsky's sample is not made clear. Elena Dubrovsky de Pasik writes that her adolescent "politically activist socialist" son's crimes "were those of being young, of thinking and of dissenting" (p. 218). An inkling of the politics guiding some is given when Mellibovsky writes of her struggle to arrive at some understanding of why her daughter disappeared:

I also learned something about economics, and I understood that the disappearances had a lot to do with the dictatorship's project to subject the country to total foreign dependency. And I learnt that the methods of repression were learnt at a school in Panama (p. 53).

In their quest for information and release of their children, the mothers endured a lot. They themselves were followed, beaten, and threatened with disappearance. In fact, their first leader, Azucena Villaflor de Vicente, was detained and disappeared. Their husbands and members of their families lost their jobs. A few underwent the horror of having another child taken in retaliation for their activities. In a few cases, phone calls were received from their missing children while they were in captivity. Mellibovsky is not sure why the authorities did this, but it amounted to sadism and a form of torture for her and other mothers.

This book lacks the historical and political analysis of Jo Fisher, in *Mothers of the Disappeared.* It also falters on dates, and the reader is not always sure of the chronology of events. The extralegal and violent activities of prior Argentine governments, the military action of the Left, and of right wing and left wing Peronists are barely mentioned. The glossary of "Names and Terms" defines the AAA (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) and gives the significance of the return of Juan Peron at "Ezeiza," but references to them in the personal accounts do not advise the reader of this. The lack of an index makes it hard to look up a specific event or name. There are some typographical errors (the return to Ezeiza was in 1972, not 1982; archbishop is misspelled on p. 113) but not caught by the editors or translators.

Nor does *Circle of Love* does not contain an analysis of the Mothers organization such as that written by Marguerite Guzman Bouvard. Bouvard interprets the mothers in terms of maternal anarchism because of their revolutionary methods, egalitarianism, and self-determination through direct participation.[3] The reader would need to supplement this book with a good history and analysis of Argentina and the Mothers to understand the context of the disappearances and the mothers acts of bravery in face of a hostile community and security forces. The political rhetoric of some of the mothers is also confusing to a reader unfamiliar with dependency theory.

What this book does is allow the mothers to describe the personal agony suffered by families touched by kidnaping and violence. In their own words, the mothers narrate how they and their families handled the brutality of the dictatorship, how they went about finding information about their children, how they often suffered more loss as fiances, spouses and other loved ones of their children were also kidnaped. In some cases, their disappeared children were their only ones, or they took steps to send their other children out of the country where they would be safer. The shock of loss was made more tragic by the lack of support from their priests, lawyers, relatives, friends, and countrymen. It was only in the bosom of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo that they received comfort and emotional support from oth-

ers who were going through the same agony. And even among the Mothers, they could not totally let down their guard–last names and telephone numbers were rarely exchanged and they left in separate groups from their circle of protest to take public buses to avoid being followed by security forces. The pain is still with them today, especially on the birthdays of their missing children or the Christmas holidays.

This pain has been aggravated by the return of democracy. In December 1986, Raul Alfonsin signed a statute of limitations on the prosecutions of military officers, and rebellions led by mid- level military officers under which the administration ended all prosecutions of officers on active service. In October 1989, Carlos Menem granted amnesty to military men accused of homicide and torture, including that of the Malvinas-Falklands War. The Mothers give little credence to the threat of military coups that faced both Alfonsin and Menem. Emilio Mignone, a well- respected lawyer whose daughter was abducted, explained the Alfonsin philosophy as "the theory of the two devils." The violence in Argentina was due to both subversive activity and terrorism on the part of the government's armed forces. Accordingly, since the violence of the subversives preceded that of the state, it excused the disappearances and torture. However, Mignone and the mothers reject that theory, arguing that the penal code should have been applied to subversives, not cruel and unusual punishments, such as kidnaping, torture, and killing. The state with its overwhelming power is supposed to protect its citizens (pp. 120-21).

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo demonstrated and politicked against the pardons of those who kidnaped, tortured, killed, and disappeared their children. Their protests and publicity remained innovative and creative. In December 1981, they organized a circle that would last twenty-four hours as a March of Resistance. They still assumed that their children were alive, and one- thousand Argentines joined them including the Organization for Peace and Justice, headed by Nobel prize winner Adolfo Perez Esquivel. With no news of their children, they marched again the next year, but the federal police did not allow them in the Plaza de Mayo so they marched in the streets. The Third March of Resistance was held on Students' Day in September 1983, and 30,000 faceless silhouettes of the disappeared were pasted on walls by hundreds of students, mothers, and volunteers. For the Fifth March of Resistance, drawings of hands made in solidarity in eighty-six countries were all along the way from the Congress to the Plaza de Mayo. For the Eighth March of Resistance in December 1987, kerchiefs showing the slogan "Jail for the perpetrators of genocide" were tied all around the Plaza de Mayo. In the 1980s, international pop artist Joan Baez met with the Mothers, while writers and artists such as Maria Elena Walsh, Mercedes Sosa, and Antonio Tarrago Ross sent poems, songs, and paintings. In 1988, the Mothers and Grandmothers were invited up on to the stage during a rock concert organized by Amnesty International, the only time they were shown on Argentine television! In addition, a film "The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo" was made by Argentines, which was shown in various centers around Argentina. The Mothers also sponsored art festivals, round tables, photograph exhibits, and talks (p. 176).

The Mothers have persisted as an organization because they still have few answers about what happened to their children. Around 1980, the group Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo was organized to search for missing grandchildren. However, unremitting hostility and factionalism plagued them, even after the restoration of constitutional government. Leader Hebe de Bonafini endured threats from the security forces and a murder attempt! Their headquarters was sacked by security forces. In 1986, the Mothers split into two groups: the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo–Founding Group and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. Mellibovsky is a member of the former, which viewed the elected governments as betrayers of the cause of the disappeared and backed the scientific exhumation of the remains of the disappeared. The latter group, led by Hebe de Bonafini, rejected the exhumations (p. 179). In her book, Marguerite Bouvard averred that the Mothers had lost members who returned to the traditional political parties–Radicals and Peronists–and that the Founding Group's faction had higher socioeconomic status and more education than the other mothers.[4]

Age, infirmity, death, and lack of money continue to take their toll on the mothers. Outside support, whether from the United Nations, the U.S. government under Jimmy Carter, the Organization of American States, Amnesty International, European women and men, and U.S. citizens have made it possible for the Mothers to expand their activities and publish. Their support inside of Argentina is more uncertain. Yes, thousands of Argentines have marched with them to protest amnesty for the military and security forces. Yes, many Argentines apologized for insulting the mothers who demonstrated during the World Cup soccer match in Argentina in 1978. Mothers in other countries have organized to protest the disappearance of their children in emulation of the Argentine mothers. And the Mothers remain more popular in Europe than they do in Argentina. They now know their children are dead, but how they died and where

they are buried are questions that still haunt them. That is why the Mothers continue their circle of love carrying pictures of their missing children and grandchildren.

Notes:

[1]. One of the mothers, Esther Aracela Lado de Sanchez, claims that children started disappearing in 1974 (p. 48).

[2]. Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, -Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo_. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1994, 74

[3]. Ibid., 229.

[4]. Ibid., 16-17.

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